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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI RELIGIOUS OFFICIAL DOWNPLAYS ISLAMIC  
EXTREMIST THREAT

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. During a December 18 meeting with the Ambassador, State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) leader Hidayat Orujov argued that Islamic extremists have minimal influence in Azerbaijan. According to a recent, confidential SCWRA survey across Azerbaijani regions to determine the number of pious Muslims, only 3 percent of Azerbaijan's Muslims were identified as devout. Even if five percent of the population were pious Muslims, Orujov observed, only 0.5 percent of this number would be radical and this is a tiny proportion of Azerbaijan's total population. Orujov said the SCWRA has concentrated on education efforts in the past year to avoid Islamic extremists taking advantage of Azerbaijanis' generally limited understanding of Islamic doctrines. Orujov noted the SCWRA has outreach efforts to officials and the general public; the SCWRA also studies local religious conditions -- including the activities of foreign states -- to undercut extremists from gaining a foothold in Azerbaijan.

The Ambassador underscored the importance of distinguishing between pious Muslim believers and radicals, as well as the need for Azerbaijanis to be able to access well-written, moderate Islamic literature. The Ambassador raised concern with what appears to be cases of selective harassment by authorities against two Christian groups. End Summary.

#### Limited Influence of Islamic Extremism

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12. (C) The Ambassador asked Orujov for his perspectives on the strength of Islamic extremist groups in Azerbaijan. Orujov said some extremist groups exist, but their strength has declined since the late 1990s. Commenting on the recent arrest of Lieutenant Kamran Asadov and affiliated Islamic extremists who were linked to the plot against the U.S. Embassy, Orujov referred to the jamiat members as "mentally-challenged people," who seek to use religion for political aims. Orujov argued that while such an incident could reoccur, these type of extremist cells are weak.

13. (C) Orujov shared the results of a confidential SCWRA survey that sought to quantify the number of pious Muslim believers in Azerbaijan. 96 percent of Azerbaijan's population are Muslims, most of which are non-practicing Muslims, and the remaining four percent include Jews, Christians, and other religious confessions. According to the survey, only three percent of Azerbaijan's Muslim population can be considered devout or pious. (The SCWRA used attendance at Friday prayers as an indicator of piety. Orujov said the SCWRA also factored in pious Muslims who do not attend official mosques into their figures.) Orujov

provided additional information on the percentage of pious Muslim believers by region: Masali (3.5 percent); Yardimli (2.9 percent); Zaqatala (2.5 percent); Baku and the surrounding Absheron villages (3.0 percent); Ganja and other western areas (1.0 percent). Based on this data, Orujov downplayed the strength of Islamic extremism in Azerbaijan, as the vast majority of Azerbaijan's Muslims do not even practice their faith. Even if five percent of the population were pious Muslims, Orujov observed, only 0.5 percent of this number would be radical and this is a tiny proportion of Azerbaijan's total population.

#### SCWRA's "Education" Efforts

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14. (C) Orujov said the SCWRA has focused on religious education over the past year. Orujov explained that because most Azerbaijanis lack a religious education, they are susceptible to Islamic extremists' outreach efforts. To address this problem, the SCWRA conducts research throughout the country to understand local religious conditions, while also analyzing other states' interests and intentions toward Azerbaijan (ie. if outside states, such as Iran, use religion to meddle in Azerbaijan's internal affairs). Orujov raised the arrest of the Mahdi Army members as an example of Iran's aggressive attempt to create a radical Shia state in Azerbaijan, while noting that Arabic and European states "have their own ideas for Azerbaijan." Orujov said the SCWRA also works with other relevant state bodies to undermine or neutralize extremist influences. In terms of education, Orujov said the SCWRA spreads information to religious leaders, the general public, law enforcement officers, and at penal institutions.

15. (C) Explaining the SCWRA's role in approving religious literature for distribution in Azerbaijan, Orujov said religious groups send an application and sample of the proposed work to the SCWRA. SCWRA experts then review the text to ensure the literature does not insult other religions or foster religious tensions. Last year, the SCWRA reviewed approximately 600 texts for distribution in Azerbaijan, according to Orujov. Orujov observed that this process parallels Turkey and other former Soviet states' approach to distributing religious literature.

16. (C) The Ambassador noted that all states, including the U.S., face the challenge of maintaining a balance between protecting religious freedom and ensuring security against radicals. It is important to distinguish between devout Muslims and radical extremists. Orujov suggested that extremists in Azerbaijan seek to manipulate religious freedom for their own ends. Azerbaijanis are free to practice their religion, but they must not "interfere with others," insult other religions, or "disturb religious stability." Some religious groups seek to attract poor, ignorant people by paying them bribes or paying their tuition bills. Orujov laughingly observed that he hopes the SCWRA's *raison d'être* will eventually go away as the problem of religious extremism gets solved.

17. (C) The Ambassador broached the idea of Embassy translating into Azerbaijani and distributing literature by American Muslims that refutes Islamic extremism from a theological perspective. Orujov said, "Certainly, we are very interested in western authors." Orujov also said he would welcome a book on Muslim life in America. At the same time, Orujov asked for U.S. funds in printing a series of approximately 30 books on the role of religion in Azerbaijan, even asking for funds to establish a printing press at the SCWRA's office. The Ambassador and Orujov agreed to exchange further information on their respective proposals. Orujov also welcomed the Ambassador's suggestion on sending five Azerbaijani clerics to Oklahoma through the Oklahoma National Guard State Partnership Program. Orujov told the Ambassador the SCWRA is hosting a conference in February ("Azerbaijan: The Crossroads of Civilization") and would welcome U.S. participation; the GOAJ will pay for the cost of

participants. Orujov promised to send more information on the conference, which aims to foster dialogue among civilizations.

#### SCWRA-Style Religious Pluralism

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¶18. (C) Orujov said the SCWRA cooperates with the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB). Orujov said he participates in a "Consultancy Council," formed at CMB Chief Sheikh Pashazade's initiative, which includes leaders from the SCWRA, the CMB, the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish communities, Orthodox church, and Catholic church. In response to the Ambassador's question whether the council includes Protestant leaders, Orujov said "no," while noting that they are included in other SCWRA conferences and he regularly meets with them.

#### Concerns about Selective Harassment

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¶19. (C) The Ambassador said she has visited several mosques, synagogues, and churches to show respect to Azerbaijan's different religious communities. There appears to be several disturbing examples of what may be GOAJ harassment, however, including the imprisonment of Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev and the December breakup of a Seventh Day Adventist worship service. Orujov said the Adventists were holding an illegal gathering because the church was not registered, and no one from the group had contacted him about this incident. He said he would welcome such a contact. Concerning Balaev, Orujov said he was arrested for resisting police after he failed to obey a court order to demolish a house deemed illegal by judicial officials. Orujov asked the Ambassador to contact him when the Embassy learns of potential counts of violations of religious freedom, and said he would look into them.

#### Comment

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¶10. (C) Orujov is a classic Soviet-era official who views religion as a dangerous force for the state to monitor and control. The SCWRA's heavy handed effort to try to control a renewed and growing interest in Islam in Azerbaijan and its failure to distinguish between pious Muslims and potential

extremists is rooted in a Soviet approach to religion.

¶11. (C) We think the SCWRA's statistics are approximately accurate, although we would add several percentage points to the reported three percent of Azerbaijani Muslims who are pious. The good news for U.S. interests in Azerbaijan is that pious moderate Muslims currently are much stronger than extremist actors. Azerbaijan faces a short-term risk of isolated extremists or terrorists; the more serious longer-term risk is growth in the body of extremists as the GOAJ limits opportunities for non-radical Muslims to practice their faith. The social and political attitudes of the next generation of pious Azerbaijanis, who increasingly have less connection to a Soviet atheistic worldview and could be mobilized around charges of the Aliyev regime's corruption, are an important unknown. This group is not now reflexively anti-American, but without continued aggressive U.S. public diplomacy and outreach efforts they will be susceptible to the anti-American views that are prevalent in Iran, the Middle East, and much of the Muslim world.

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